

Beginning to Pray Together

By David and Jan Stoop

*My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.
Isaiah 56:7*

Here are eight suggestions for beginning to pray together that were given to us by the couples who responded to our questionnaire. They come from their own experiences and were developed through their own struggles to begin to pray together.

1. Take the time needed to talk with each other about your thoughts and feelings about prayer and praying together. Do this without pressuring one another or trying to make the other feel guilty. See if you can agree that this is something you both want in your marriage. Talk about your fears in as open a way as possible. Talk also about your expectations up front, so they don't undermine you later on.
2. Pick a specific time and make a commitment to each other to begin praying together at that time. You'll never get started praying together on a regular basis if you don't make this definite commitment to a specific, agreed-upon time.
3. Don't be upset if you miss a day. It's important, if you miss a day, to just start again the next day. Consistency will come over time. Let yourself off the hook here.
4. Decide who will do what. For example, who decides where you will pray together? Who reminds the other that it is time to pray together? Couples reported that they couldn't just make a commitment to a time and then assume both of them would remember. It helped for one person to take on the responsibility to say, "Hey, it's time for us to pray together." It was interesting to note that for the couples who were successful, it was more often the husband who did the reminding.
5. Start where you are both comfortable. This means that if only one of you is comfortable praying out loud, then you don't start there, for both aren't comfortable at that place. If one of you insists that you pray together silently, then both can be comfortable at that place and that's where you begin.
6. Set a time limit. It was surprising how many couples made this point. "No long-winded prayers," they said. One wife wrote, "No long monologues with fourteen items in them!" Another couple suggested, "First start small and grow from there. Anyone can pattern five or ten minutes into their lives, as opposed to one hour." Another couple said, "Start with five minutes and then gradually, over time, see what happens. Don't try to take too much time as you begin."
7. Agree at the beginning that neither one of you will preach in your praying. Nothing can stop the process like using the time to pray together as a way to preach to your spouse, or to make suggestions in your prayer. Sometimes just making this a rule will give a reluctant spouse the freedom to get started, for a common fear is that one's spouse will use this time to preach rather than to pray.
8. One husband suggested: "Start with a list of things you want to pray about. This could be done individually or together. Then pray individually about your time of praying together before you actually come together for prayer."

Now that we have the plan, what do we do as a couple when we pray together? A basic premise to keep in mind is the importance of praying *for* each other. Although the Bible doesn't say directly, "Husbands and wives, pray for each other," it does say in James 5:16 that we are to "pray for each other so that you may be healed." That certainly includes husbands praying for wives and wives praying for husbands. One couple said, "Every time we pray together, we begin by praying a blessing over each other. We do this to edify our spouse and make them feel loved."

One of the things we do is find different prayers in the Bible and then agree to pray them for each other. For example, one of our favorites is a prayer Paul prayed for the Philippians in chapter 1, verses 9 and 10. He writes,

This is my prayer; that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ.

We've found this prayer to be a beautiful expression of what we want to experience in our marriage. We often use it as our theme verse for the couples' retreats we lead. Here's the way Dave would pray this for Jan:

"Father, I pray this for Jan, that her love will abound more and more in both knowledge and depth of insight, so that she will be able to discern what is the best, and will be pure and blameless until the day Christ returns."

You might want to read through Paul's letters, and other books of the Bible, looking for prayers that you can pray for each other. This can be a very meaningful way to pray for your spouse. If you don't use these prayers when you actually pray with your spouse, then show your spouse the passage and explain that you are saying that prayer for him or her.

1. Pray silently together. All too often, couples believe that they are praying together only if they are praying out loud. Remember that the key is to intentionally pray together. When we are talking about this with couples' groups, we suggest that they begin by praying silently. Here are the guidelines: First, sit down together and hold hands. A number of couples have commented on how important it was to be touching each other as they prayed together. Next, talk together about some of your mutual concerns as a couple. Then, as you finish the conversation, one of you should say to the other, "Let's pray about these things." Finally, spend some time in silent prayer together. Whoever finishes first should squeeze his or her partner's hand as a way of saying, "I've finished." When the other person finishes, he or she squeezes back. Congratulations! You've just prayed together.

After doing this for a time, you might say "Amen" out loud as you finish and squeeze your partner's hand, and then wait for him or her to say "Amen."

2. Finish silent prayer aloud. The second way you can pray together is an extension of the way we have just described. It takes us a step further in becoming more open and more comfortable praying together. Instead of simply ending your silent prayer with a verbal "Amen," agree that after a squeeze of the hand, the other person will finish their silent prayer out loud. This does not have to be profound. Simply say something that expresses thanksgiving and praise for the knowledge that God is present with you and that he not only hears your prayers but also knows and hears the deeper needs of your hearts. Or thank God for being present with you, in both your time of conversation and your time of prayer.

3. Write out your prayer. First, write out a short, simple prayer that is meaningful to you. Do this apart from your partner. Then come together and read your prayer to your partner. After you both have finished, you may want to discuss your positive responses to each other's prayers, and how it felt for you to hear one another talk to God. Or read together some of the prayers we have included at the end of each chapter.

4. Pray as you talk. This approach to praying together simply means we back up in our conversation and

consciously include God in the process. As a couple, you can simply stop in the middle of your conversation and suggest, “Let’s pray a moment about this.” If you’re at the silent stage of praying together, pray silently about what you’ve just been talking about.

If you are verbalizing your prayers, you can simply acknowledge that God is a part of your conversation. For example, when we are talking about a concern we have, one of us might simply say, “Lord, you are here listening as we talk, and we want to acknowledge your presence and ask for your help with this situation.” Even this can be simplified, or the other person may add a sentence or two in prayer. We seldom say “Amen” when we do this—we just go back to our conversation. Over time, God’s place within your conversation will become more natural, and you will become more aware of his presence.

5. Pray out loud, together, daily. This is the same as our earlier suggestions, except that you are now comfortable enough with the process that you can verbalize your prayer in the presence of your spouse. In our questionnaire, we asked couples to tell us how they moved from praying silently together to praying out loud (meaning, was it difficult?). We wanted to know if couples talked about it beforehand, or if it just happened. We were surprised when a number of them such as the couple we mentioned earlier, replied, “We opened our mouth and said...” We laughed, but it really does boil down to that approach—opening our mouths and saying out loud what we are praying inside.

Over the years, as we’ve become more comfortable with verbalizing our prayers together, we have expanded our evening prayer time to other times of the day. When we are together, one of us may feel the need to pray, so we stop and pray. It is more just a part of our conversation, even though we are still purposely stopping to pray together.

6. Practice “vulnerable” prayer. This type of praying together is what we think most husbands (and some wives) fear is what we have in mind when we talk about praying together. It is difficult, and we certainly don’t suggest starting this way. In vulnerable prayer, we pray about ourselves in the presence of our spouse. Along with praying “Lord, help us,” or “Lord, help them,” we pray “Lord, help me.” When we pray this way, we are comfortable enough with each other that we can bring forward, with candor and honesty, our weaknesses, our failures, and our struggles, and talk openly with God in the presence of our spouse.

This type of praying together is listed last, not because it is the best, but because it is the most difficult. Some couples may never pray this way, while others become very comfortable praying this way and feel that it is this type of praying together that really enhances their spiritual intimacy. Remember, however, the goal is not to pray vulnerably together; it is simply to pray together, consistently.